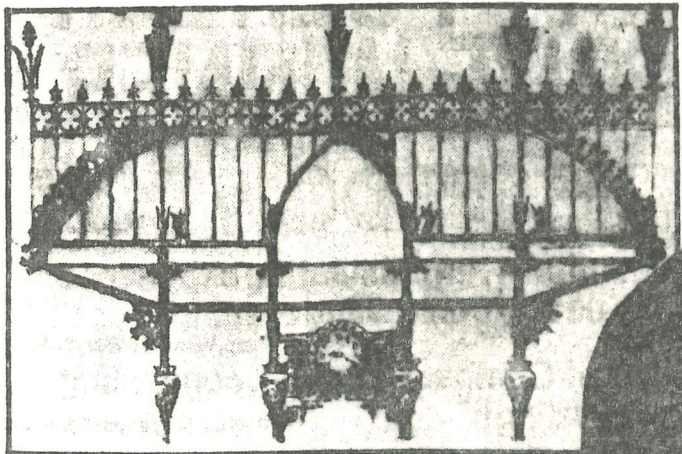


The Gaudi Art That Survived a Fire



By PAUL GOLDBERGER

THE EXTRAORDINARY ORIGINALITY of Antonio Gaudi, the Spanish architect who died in 1926, has made his name a familiar one to people who ordinarily have little interest in architecture; tourists to Barcelona, for example, inevitably make a pilgrimage to the Sagrada Familia, Gaudi's vast unfinished church whose four tall openwork spires and plethora of plastic shapes dominate the cityscape. The Sagrada Familia is a building that the architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock called "perhaps the greatest ecclesiastical monument of the last one hundred years."

Gaudi lived an ascetic life, devoted in its later years only to his work and to religious concerns. When virtually all of the drawings and records from his office were destroyed by fire in 1936, scholars thought they would have to study his career in a near vacuum—there were neither descendants to offer personal recollections nor drawings to offer documentary evidence.

But recently, various drawings by Gaudi that had somehow escaped destruction began to turn up here and there around Spain, and now, through the remarkable efforts of Prof. George R. Collins of Columbia University, virtually all of them—more than a hundred—have been assembled for exhibition in New York.

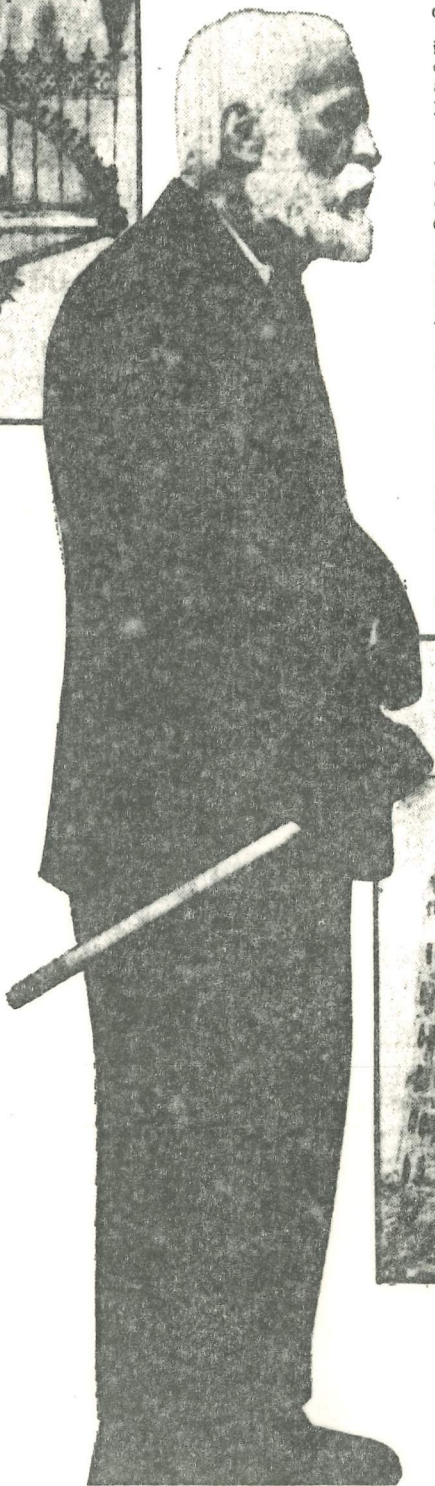
The show is at the Drawing Center, the new nonprofit gallery and study center at 137 Greene Street in SoHo, and it is no understatement to say it is one of the major architectural exhibitions of the year. The newly found drawings go beyond being a significant scholarly find; they communicate a great deal of the meaning of architecture to a general audience as well.

The show unfortunately includes almost no drawings of Gaudi's famed church; all of these, apparently, are gone forever. But it includes a rich array of material from Gaudi's early years, when he designed in a sort of neo-Gothic style, and continues through a Beaux-Arts phase to the more free-flowing style for which Gaudi was best known.

The movement of the architect's career is traced clearly through the evidence on the Drawing Center's walls; with everything together, it is not difficult to see that Gaudi was much more a rationalist than the eccentric he is often considered to have been, for what he was seeking was not iconoclastic form but a way of expressing nature's flowing forms in architecture.

One drawing indicates this with special clarity. It is a sketch of the old facade of the Casa Batllo, a straightforward building to which Gaudi added a new, free-flowing facade in 1904-6. Over the old facade, Gaudi sketched his new, curving forms.

They do not cover the entire facade, but only parts of it, so we see the new style evolving from the old



one, as if a new world were breaking through. The drawing is at once a graceful object and a remarkable document of an architectural style in transition.

The exhibition reminds us, as Professor Collins states in a wall label, "that there is an artistry to the drawings of an architect of stature. While many of a professional architect's drawings are part of construction—or legal—processes, others are works of art in their own right."

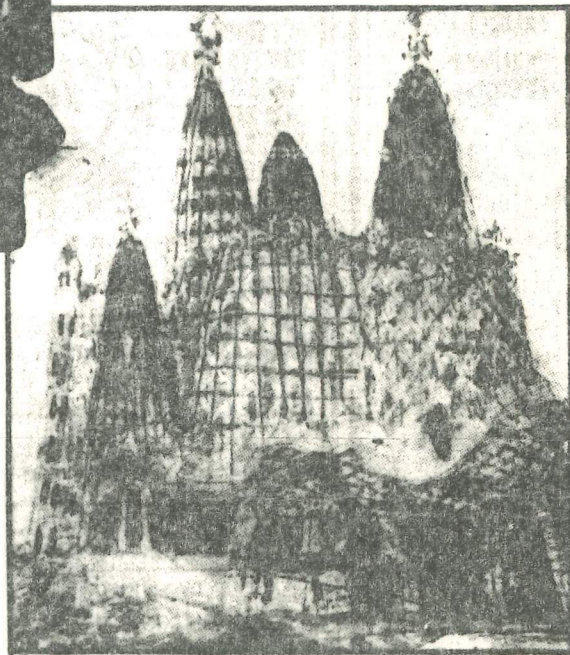
This is especially true of many of the early drawings, which show a skill for detail and coloration that reminds one of their contemporaries, the drawings from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris that were shown at the Museum of Modern Art in 1975.

Gaudi's detail drawings for such never-built projects as a patio for a provincial capitol in 1876 and a huge, domed auditorium, done in 1877, are very much the equal in both style and quality of the work done at the Beaux-Arts in Paris.

The show, which was organized by Professor Collins and sponsored by the Spanish Consulate General in New York, marks an especially auspicious debut for the Drawing Center as an architectural-exhibition gallery. The center is only a few months old, but its curators seem to have learned quickly how to organize a show.

The drawings are not only clearly and precisely labeled, there is an album of photographs of completed Gaudi buildings available for visitors to compare with the drawings, and there are even magnifying glasses available to permit close examination.

The exhibition will be on view Mondays through Saturdays through May 24. The hours are 11 A.M. to 6 P.M., except on Wednesday, when they are 11 A.M. to 9 P.M.



Antonio Gaudi in Barcelona around 1925, and two of his architectural drawings: Santa Coloma de Cervelle, church for a textile workers' colony, and, at the top, a kiosk.